Community Development Queensland
A NETWORK OF CD PRACTITIONERS

COVID-19 and the
Disruption to Community
Development.

Wednesday 19th August, 2020
With Lynda Shevellar

<u>My role this evening</u> is to be a provocateur – meaning I am not trying to hold to a particular position, but rather present some propositions and possibilities as a means to provoke some responses. I'd like to declare agnosticism, but the truth is I am a fan of dystopian literature. If I'm brutally honest, my view of the future is less this…

<mark><Slide: Kitten, bunnies & rainbows ></mark>

and more this….

<mark><Slide: Planet of the Apes final scene></mark>

(I'm just saying that I wasn't surprised that the dolphins in the canals of Venice were a hoax…)

So these musing represent my own struggles to come to terms with our current conditions. I'm going to pepper you with a few different – sometimes contradictory

ideas. I don't expect you to engage with them all, but I am hoping there will be connections and places of resonance to help enrich some small group discussions.

Most of us would be familiar with the future scenarios circulating to reflect possibilities for community from passive faith that science will cure us all, through to the mournful acknowledgement of our inevitable demise. And while this is of course relevant to our discussion, I'm keen to keep the focus on the nature of community development, and the implications for theory and practice. So this session is about reflecting on the ways in which COVID-19 is disrupting CD theory and practice, the ways new technologies are both empowering and limiting us, and the consequences of these changes for how we think about CD.

Take this evening for example. We have lost the freedom to mingle as we wish with whomever we choose – we are facilitated into groups and constrained by the online interactive platform, let alone limited by the dwindling supply of liquor in our cabinets. BUT we also get the joy of including new friends into this space, from Townsville, Tasmania, Toowoomba and Melbourne – that's something that would rarely happen mid-week at the Ship Inn at South Bank, Brisbane. We are not constrained by how many a room can hold (increasingly difficult in our socially distanced times) BUT we do run the danger of more opportunities for misunderstanding.

So, in framing this discussion, one of the classic pieces of theory I return to comes from Michel Foucault (1991; see also Rabinow, 1991) and the idea that power simultaneously liberates as it constrains. COVID-19 is a physical phenomenon. However, how we respond to it, is a very social and political one and thus an exercise of power. Further it is not one act of power but many multiple acts of power all being exercised and circulating at once.

In some ways that positions CD workers beautifully as our work requires us to hold space, work with ambiguity and open ended possibilities, think in complexity, and contradiction, and develop a craft that is nimble and responsive to context.

So the first **Proposition is that crisis creates opportunity as much as it creates challenges and barriers. .**

This is the utopian view of our current context – and it's golden rays are all around us – the call to see the pandemic as a chance to revisit our values, reconnect with family, bring our home and personal world back into the centre of our lives and put work in its rightful place, cease chasing material hedonistic goals, challenge capitalism, and to embrace our creative soulful selves

Books like Martin Power's "Life After COVID-19: The Other Side of Crisis" invite us to see this pandemic as a great learning opportunity suggesting that we can "build back better". Power says, "If we see the pandemic as a dress rehearsal for the larger problem of climate change,…it provides opportunity to think about what we can improve and how rapidly we can make changes".

In the DevPolicy Blog, Chris Roche and Fiona Tarpy (2020) observed that amid the tragic downsides, a number of positive unexpected benefits are emerging. The declines in pollution seen in China, Lombardy and Venice, and the emergence of local collective self-help groups are early signs of this. They note that if forms of isolation and lack of travel last for a significant time – it may be that some of these benefits and the new habits which emerge could mean that returning to the status quo becomes less likely. As some are optimistically arguing, this could even in turn lead to "a significant shift in the way individuals, institutions and politicians discuss our responsibility to protect vulnerable groups in our societies", and the role of the state in doing so. As always, context matters, and how this plays out in different settings and with different vulnerabilities will be critical.

There are signs that the local is becoming vital. People are singing from the balconies, animal shelters are emptying for the first time ever as people have time at home, and there is an upsurge in deliberately supporting local businesses. Families are spending quality time around board games and there has been an upsurge in home crafts and baking.

Neighbours are meeting each other for the first time on their streets, and unable to travel far, people are embracing their own backyard. A particularly promising sign was that in a survey conducted in April this year, people indicated that they were more worried about society becoming more selfish – than they were about losing their jobs, feeling lonely or catching the virus themselves (Saeri, et al, 2020).

This movement to the local was evident in the Qld Government's Care Army as response to COVID-19. I was intrigued by the resistance to the temptation to centralise activities and to control the deployment of people. Instead of a giant database to manage well-meaning volunteers, the response was one of building local capacity by creating some simple resources, like postcards, that we could all pop into the neighbour's mailboxes. The campaign invited people to step up as neighbours, to help people who were isolated, with shopping or medication.

<Slide: Qld Care Army postcard>[1]

So a colleague and I applied for a COVID-19 related research grant to look at the impact of the pandemic on neighbourliness and community relations.

The feedback was intriguing, with one reviewer commenting,

> The proposal advances an overly positive view of neighbours. i.e. that neighbours are good/necessary. Indeed, in the context of COVID-19, it is possible that neighbours become far less important. For example, the significant shift to online connections (via platforms such as zoom) which allow connections away from a place, away from the neighbourhood.

So the third provocative proposition which suggests that place is becoming less rather than more important – at least to some. It suggests that the changes to interaction and engagement are not temporary but may have longer lasting implications.

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[1] See https://www.covid19.qld.gov.au/carearmy

And if place is reducing in importance, then this means that new spaces or interaction – particularly the online worlds become increasingly central.

<Slide: Star Trek: Resistance is futile>

In the blink of an eye, so many of us have adapted to online digital platforms that invite diverse ways of collaborating. There are undoubtedly benefits to this, with unique efficiencies, and untold possibilities for the local and the global to connect. But there are questions to be asked about the price we pay for new kinds of interactions.

As I wrote for the flyer, much of community development (CD) theory and practice has, at its heart, the somewhat romantic image of people sitting in a circle together, in place. Whether it be around a fire, around a kitchen table, under a mango tree, what we have always honoured is the vital importance of being present to one another. Through finely honed skills of observation, communication and connection we help people move from private issues to public analysis and collective action. So what does it mean for the field of CD if both time and place are fractured?

There is already a large literature detailing the complexities of online life for participatory development practice.

<Slide: Our changing participatory landscape>

The decline of social capital thesis observes the loss of traditional community participation – clubs and societies, community committee, unions and volunteer groups.

In their place emerges the vehicles of new democracy:
- Web technologies (blogs, Facebook, Pinterest, twitter, Youtube etc)
- Crowd sourcing
- New organisational forms eg GetUp, Change.Org
- E-democracy eg E-petitions, e-voting

Does life in the time of a pandemic simply intensify the changes that are already underway? I suspect it does – in both directions.

The online world accelerates digital literacies and has permitted voices to be heard in new and arresting ways; The rise of new participatory forms enables

- Convenience
- Efficiency
- Immediacy
- Flexibility
- Ease
- Flat structures
- Mobility
- Anonymity
- It has enabled people to connect across the state, nationally and internationally in whole new ways

<Slide: Rallies around the world>

You would all be aware of the rallies occurring all around the world on a range of issues – from the#MeToo movement, #Black Lives Matter and closer to home, the #KP campaign – actions on behalf of refugees being held in detention at Kangaroo Point here in Brisbane. It's exciting to see people willing and able to agitate for political change and we can see how online campaigns have enabled the mobilisation of enormous numbers of people in a very short space of time. This raises exciting questions of how digital literacies enable more meta work (beyond the local); will we see more and more CD work being fuelled by issues rather than place?

Yet, also there are questions to do with qualities of connection and the nature of participation:

- <Slide: Marriage equality equal sign campaign>

Some of you may recall the highly visible Human Rights Campaign for Marriage Equality, which urged Facebook users to replace their profile photographs with a red equal sign. Critics claim that this is not activism, but "slacktivism". At the core the problem is that activism is scaled from limited to high engagement. Those who believe in the positive value of online activism present arguments about community visibility, solidarity and mobilisation, or that it is better than nothing. Does the courage to visibly—if virtually—stand up for what a person believes have an effect on that person's social network, or is it just cheap, posturing and virtue signalling?

<slide: outrage>

It has also amplified many inequalities – including digital access. When we look at who is participating in e-democracy it tends to be people who are literate, people who are already well resourced and well-educated, middle class.

As the Red Cross campaign reminded us, liking isn't helping.

<Slide: Red Cross, Liking isn't helping>

Online participation still encounters issues of quality, authenticity, bias, and transparency. It can also enforce new divides and increases homogeneity of social clusters (de Gournay, 2002). According to Gergen (2008), the result is insularity of networks and detachment from the democratic process. It is easy to detach and swipe left on issues we find unattractive... And as Baum et al (2000) note, one of the key areas of decline in participation is for those done with other people. In other words, people are participating – but in more isolated and less collaborative ways through online platforms.

The result is:

<Slide: #Do something>

- Being informed is confused with being engaged

- Our efforts can become scattered and diffused rather than concentrated and potent
- Participation becomes transactionary rather than transformatory
- Viewed in the same way as a consumer transaction, we sign the petition, donate the $3 or press the like button, and that is our currency for assuaging guilt

<Slide: I am a good person>

So what I am intrigued by is the challenge to connect the mezzo work of CD with the meta work we seek to do. There are limits to what analysis and an increased consciousness can achieve without a drive to action. And what a call to action can achieve without organisation and discipline and the sustainability of the vision over the long haul.

MacLeod and Byrne (2012) speak of CD as sitting across a continuum from community building to community organising – suggesting we need to move back and forth across this spectrum and be careful not to get stuck in either space.

<slide: CD Continuum>

I suspect there is a whole skill set we are trying to figure out. I think we are all struggling to rapidly develop new competencies. I know I'm struggling to know how to bring them forth in others. Thirty years of group work and *I* don't know how to work developmentally in a space that isn't physical.

Part of the challenge is that for me – and for many others I suspect, that learning, knowing, relating isn't just a cognitive experience. The body is a site of learning and being.
Does learning and relating in the online world doom us to live a shallower version of ourselves?

Finally, it's worth thinking about what it means to move interactions online.

Obviously There are bigger questions of how being in the digital world enables corporations to harvest human data (see for instance Zuboff, 2019) – that's probably beyond the scope of our discussion and honestly, as I listen to people's anxiety about their movements being tracked via the COVID app, I can only envy the obviously much more important, exciting and dangerous lives they lead

<Slide: Tracking my movements from fridge to screen to couch>

What I'm more interested in is how we engage in and with online spaces at the micro and mezzo levels.

One argument comes from researchers who caution that new mediums do not replicate original participatory vehicles. "The unique characteristics of face-to-face communications in building consensus, communicating complex information, or creating new ideas means it cannot be totally replaced by online communications" (Goodspeed 2008, cited in Mandarano, Meenar & Steins, 2010).

My colleague Jonah Rimer, a criminologist who works in the world of cybercrime, he challenges what he sees as a false distinction between the "digital" and the "real." He argues that setting this binary up fundamentally misrepresents the relationship between the online and offline, in both directions. First, it flies in the face of the myriad ways that the online is real. Second (and just as problematically), it implies that everything physical is real." Many of the horrific outcomes of people's online experience, like online child sexual exploitation material and cyber-bulllying, emerge because people see the online space as not real, and thus their actions as not being real. I'm not suggesting we are all about to become cyber bullies. But it does suggest that the online space invites different social norms and regulation and fundamentally changes the nature of our interactions. And this is what we are struggling with.

So what does it mean to treat the online world as real?

As I talk to my workshop participants online, it is tempting to move to a regretful space, "Well if we were in the classroom I'd be getting you all to draw on paper…" But this engagement suggests that the online interaction is less than, that it matters less, that the consequences are less. I'm not present to them in the moment and in

our context. I'm investing my time in an imagined alternative group and space – which is neither helpful nor respectful. So how do we create opportunities for connection online? And how do we be deeply present to one another online?

<Slide: Black zoom screen>

And all of this makes me wonder if – as attendants to the microprocesses of human interaction and relationship development, there is a unique opportunity for us as development practitioners.

Drawing on social movements in the Philippines, Wright (2012) notes the importance of generating hope, creating empowered subjects and generating alternative realities that make fear – if not redundant – then no longer central to the way people frame their lives (p. 223).

This kind of hope is what Gassen Hage calls hope "on the side of life" (Zournazi & Hage, 2002, p. 150), which is drawn from an appreciation of a capacity to act and to relate to others. Hage argues that hope drives us to continue to want to live. In what he calls "an ethics of joy" this hope emerges through being deeply present (Zournazi & Hage, 2002).

Similarly, Solnit (2016, p. xi) is clear that hope is not dead – but that it does need reworking: She says,

<Slide: Flower pushing through the cracks in concrete>

> It's important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I'm interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act. It's also not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative... You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings.

More simply, hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in that spaciousness of uncertainty is still room to act (Solnit, p. xii).

OR as I prefer to think of it:

Small Group Discussion (20 mins)

- Who are you and where are you from?

- What drew you to the discussion this evening?

- What resonated for you?

- What else was sparked for you?

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